

## **“Let Me Tell You About A Vineyard”:**

### **Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard and the Green Revolution**

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#### ***Abstrak***

*Dalam artikel ini, Yesaya 5:1-7 disajikan sebagai sebuah puisi yang diucapkan dari perspektif perempuan dalam konteks pergolakan sosial yang melanda pedesaan Yehuda abad kedelapan. Pada konteks tersebut, pergeseran pengambilan keputusan dari lokal ke monarki menyebabkan krisis di masyarakat. Praktek pertanian tradisional dan struktur kekerabatan rusak, menyebabkan kesulitan besar. Karena wanita di komunitas pedalaman bertanggung jawab atas banyak aspek kehidupan, mereka berada dalam posisi yang unik untuk mengkritik peristiwa tersebut. Dalam Yesaya 5:1-7, perspektif perempuan mendominasi puisi itu. Berbicara kepada Allah dan nahālā, sang perempuan menggunakan retorika yang kuat untuk mengatasi ketidakadilan yang telah menjungkirbalikkan dunianya. Artikel ini menggunakan metode sosio-sastra, yang merupakan sintesis dari kritik sosial-sains, kritik retorik, analisis feminis, dan metode historis-kritis. Artikel ini juga dimaksudkan sebagai bacaan ekologi terhadap Yesaya 5:1-7. Mengingat pentingnya peranan studi Alkitab guna melandasi perjuangan melawan krisis ekologi maka metode yang digunakan di dalam artikel ini sangat bermanfaat terutama untuk membaca Yes 5:1-7 di dalam hubungannya dengan situasi sosial saat ini dan strategi retorikal: Revolusi Hijau di India dan tanggapan retorikal dari pejuang lingkungan hidup Vandana Shiva. Cara membaca seperti ini dapat menolong pembaca untuk memahami Yesaya 5:1-7 sebagai teks yang independen dan dapat pula memperkaya relevansi sosial dan ekologi dari teks tersebut.*

***Kata kunci: Nyanyian kebun anggur, Yesaya 5:1-7, feminist, dunia sosial, ekologi, agraris, puisi alkitabiah, Revolusi Hijau, India, Vandana Shiva***

Many interpretive approaches have been taken to Isa 5:1-7, the Song of the Vineyard. The approach taken here is that this poem is spoken from a village woman’s perspective in the context of the social upheaval engulfing the countryside of eighth century Judah.<sup>1</sup> This was a time when the shift from local to monarchical decision-making had caused a crisis in communities. Traditional agricultural practices and kinship structures were breaking down, causing great suffering and hardship. Because

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<sup>1</sup> There is an almost unanimous scholarly agreement that Isa 5:1-7 can be dated to the eighth century, prior to the destruction of Israel by Assyria in 722 B. C. E.

women in ancient Judean rural communities were responsible for many important aspects of village life, they were in a unique position to witness and critique these events. In Isa 5:1-7 it is this woman's perspective that dominates the poem. Speaking for her God and for her village, she uses powerful prophetic rhetoric to address the injustice that is turning her world upside down.

The cry that concludes Isa 5:1-7 reverberates into our time and continues to be heard in communities around the world. The Green Revolution in India illustrates the drastic shift from small-scale diversified agriculture to industrial monocrops. There, Vandana Shiva has been a strong woman's voice of protest against the deadly impact of Green Revolution technology on local communities and the land. Reading the ancient text in light of these current events is important as the comparison enriches our understanding of both contexts.

### **Eighth Century Judean Agriculture**

The dynamics of agriculture as it was practiced in the Judean hill country in the pre-monarchic period have been extensively explored by David Hopkins.<sup>2</sup> Hopkins argues that in order to deal with various environmental, demographic, and technological factors, peasants established particular "agricultural objectives," the most important of which were risk spreading and optimization of labour. Risks associated with the high risk environment of the hill country—notably unpredictable rainfall and poor soil—were dealt with in various ways. Sowing patterns of wheat and barley were staggered over the first months of winter in order to lessen the risk of the entire crop being lost to lack of rainfall. Risks were also spread through a program of diversification. As the hill country had a wide variety of environmental niches the terrain lent itself to such a program, with the village crop mix including staple cereals and vegetables as well as tree and vine crops. Farmers also developed ways to store produce so it could be used in years of want. In addition, to increase resiliency the peasants mixed agriculture with pastoral pursuits.

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<sup>2</sup> David C. Hopkins, "Life on the Land: The Subsistence Struggles of Early Israel," in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, Charles E. Carter and Carol L. Meyers, ed. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 471-488; repr., *Biblical Archaeologist* 50 (1987): 178-91; idem, "The Dynamics of Agriculture in Monarchical Israel," Kent Harold Richards; *SBLSP* 22, (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1983), 177-202; idem, *The Highlands of Canaan. Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age*, SWBA 3 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985).

In order to optimize available labour early Israelite villages developed complex social and economic relationships and carefully delineated patterns of labour within and between the villages. It was imperative that labour be optimized so villages could develop labour intensive projects such as terraces and attend to all the labour demands of harvesting time. Strategies for optimizing labour included increasing family size, calling for larger individual contributions of labour, and forming communal work groups. Interhousehold and intervillage systems of co-operation and networks of exchange were imperative for these strategies to work.

For family members in the difficult physical environment of the Judean hill country, life was clearly focused on the family's physical survival. As in other traditional agrarian societies, role specialization was based on gender and age. Adult women were involved in preparing and producing food, producing textiles, tending gardens and small animals, and bearing and caring for children. Women within the household had considerable economic and decision-making power because of their control of these important productive and reproductive tasks. Both women and men were involved in the ongoing tending of vineyards and orchards, milking animals, and pitching in during the intense harvesting period. Adult males were primarily engaged in the heavy work of plough agriculture, clearing fields, hewing cisterns, building homes, and constructing terraces. From an early age children were assigned tasks that contributed to the family's survival.

But in the eighth century Judah of the Song of the Vineyard this integrated system of village-based agriculture was in crisis. Warfare and royal construction projects necessitated that soldiers and corvee labour be available at times that interfered with the labour needs of village agriculture, particularly during the intensive harvesting period. And the demand for luxury goods by the new elites necessitated an import-export trade, with the taxation that fuelled this trade taking the form of agricultural produce. This tax burden contrasted with production systems of village agriculture in two important ways.

First, the state demanded a particular type of produce—produce that could be easily controlled and commandeered and was easily storable, transportable and

exchangeable. Wine, as well as wheat and olive oil, ideally fit these criteria.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this demand, there was a shift in the system of land tenure from peasant freehold to plantations as the land around villages was transformed into vineyards and orchards along with the requisite processing installations.<sup>4</sup> The loss of what was usually the most productive land decreased the household's ability to control a range of ecological niches and forced the family onto poor and poorer lands at greater distances from the village.<sup>5</sup> In addition, diversification was by necessity limited as land was devoted to one of these three key crops. Village families now had far fewer options to fall back on in the event of a bad harvest.

Second, the state demanded that taxes be paid on a regular basis. This demand clearly ran counter to the requirements of a high risk, seasonal climate. If the expected October rains did not fall the spring cereal harvest was compromised. In traditional, diversified, village agriculture this situation could be dealt with by drawing on other crops. But because the foci of agricultural production had shifted alternate crops were no longer bountiful. If the rains did not fall calamity could befall the village.

Archaeological evidence and the biblical record indicate that the eighth century was a period of tremendous wealth and growth in both Israel and Judah. The elites experienced the benefits of relative political stability, territorial expansion, royal construction, and a vibrant import-export trade for luxury goods.<sup>6</sup> Evidence of increased terracing, wine presses, and possibly royal vineyards during this period point to greatly increased grape production; there was a commensurate peak in the production of other trade goods.<sup>7</sup> For urban-based elites this system was clearly beneficial.<sup>8</sup> But from the perspective of Judean peasants this new system was a disaster.

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<sup>3</sup> Chaney and Premnath support Hopkins' argument that it was the elite's need for luxury goods that was the impetus for the trade in wine, oil, and grain. See Marvin L. Chaney, "Systemic Study of the Israelite Monarchy," *Semeia* 37 (1986), 72-73; idem, "Bitter Bounty. The Dynamics of Political Economy Critiqued by the Eighth Century Prophets," in *Bible and Liberation. Political and Social Hermeneutics*, Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 253; D.N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets. A Social Analysis* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice, 2003), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Chaney, "Systemic Study," 72-73; Premnath, *Prophets*, 94-98; Hopkins, "Dynamics of Agriculture," 200.

<sup>5</sup> Chaney, "Systemic Study," 201.

<sup>6</sup> Chaney, "Bitter Bounty," 257-258.

<sup>7</sup> See Premnath, *Prophets*, 62-70.

<sup>8</sup> Chaney, "Bitter Bounty," 258.

As long as villagers were bound together by the traditional ties of the *bêt 'āb* and *mišhpāhâ*<sup>9</sup> and were able to retain their agricultural surplus, crises related to their land could usually be dealt with. Biblical law sought to reduce harm to farmers through the institution of a variety of measures: prohibition of interest on loans to the poor (Deut 23:19-20); stipulation of humane treatment and manumission after a set term for debt slaves (Deut 24:14-15; 15:12-18; Lev 25:10); and establishment of the role of redeemer, a kinsman who could buy back family land or members when they were foreclosed upon (Lev 25:25-28). Despite these safeguards the monarchy's demands for soldiers and corvee labour and for tax in the form of agricultural produce meant that the villagers' margin of error lessened and the possibility of a catastrophic loss of livelihood increased. Peasants became increasingly dependent on centralized networks of exchange, which meant that when natural disaster struck and peasants had to borrow, the only people the formerly self-sufficient villagers could turn to were the increasingly powerful and wealthy landowners.<sup>10</sup> While the *naḥălâ* ("inheritance") was theoretically inalienable,<sup>11</sup> the monarchy's increasing control of the judicial process made it easier for land owners to circumvent legal custom or even to change laws regarding land tenure and more and more of the peasants' traditional lands fell into the estates of a few wealthy landowners.<sup>12</sup> The rate of family breakup increased and the ranks of a marginalized underclass of landless labourers living a hand-to-mouth existence according to the seasonal demands of viticulture and orcharding swelled. During lulls in the agricultural calendar these labourers were unemployed, forced to buy in the

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<sup>9</sup> In the eighth century Judean society from which Isa 5:1-7 emerged the basic building block was the 'nuclear' family, typically composed of parents and two children, plus any servants. As this small group was not able to deal on its own with the myriad tasks required to survive in the difficult environment of the Judean hill country, families joined together with others to create a larger social unit—the *bêt 'āb*. Several *bêt 'āb* together comprised the *mišhpāhâ*, a term which is generally thought to equate to the inhabitants of a village.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>11</sup> Possession of land was essential to the existence of the *bêt 'āb* and each had a *naḥălâ* ("inheritance") for which it was responsible. It was up to the *bêt 'āb* to transmit accumulated knowledge and skills relating to the *naḥălâ*, provide for the future (by preparing seed, raising animals, clearing land, and digging cisterns), and pass on the *naḥălâ* from generation to generation. Transfer of the *naḥălâ* was affected through inheritance within the *bêt 'āb*. Only under very dire economic conditions would the *naḥălâ* be sold or transferred out of the *bêt 'āb* and safeguards were in place to protect the *bêt 'āb* from permanent alienation from its land (Lev 25:8-55).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, Leo G. Perdue, et al., *The Family, Religion and Culture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 88. Also see Chaney, "Systemic Study," 73.

marketplace from unscrupulous merchants the grains they had previously grown for themselves in their villages.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this context of a society in transition that Isa 5:1-7 is situated. A traditional society based on *bêt 'āb* that had sustained traditional agricultural practices for generations was experiencing a deepening crisis, and it is to this crisis that the speakers in the Song respond.

### **The voices of Isa 5:1-7**

Typically, the voices in Isa 5:1-7 are all viewed as masculine: a male speaker or speakers (a farmer, troubadour, and/or the prophet) and Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> Here I propose that there are two voices: a woman, who speaks in vv. 1-2 and v. 7, and Yahweh, who speaks in vv. 3-6. My conclusions regarding the number and identity of speakers, and the identity of these speakers, are based on literary and structural features as well as internal and external evidence.

#### **Speaker I – vv. 1-2, 7**

Three lines of evidence point to the speaker in vv. 1-2 and 7 being a woman: the speaker's point of reference; the fact that the song is traditionally a woman's oral genre; and an interpretation of the phrase *šîrat dōdi*.

#### **Speaker's point of reference**

Shunia Bendor argues that when examining kinship relations in the Bible it is important to keep in mind the point of reference of the speaker.<sup>15</sup> The speaker in vv. 1-2 is the person who observed a man labouring to establish a new vineyard: he hoed and cleared the land of stones, planted the vines, built a watchtower for protection, and hewed a wine vat. The translation of *šîrat dōdi* as "song of my beloved" (see below) and the repetition of "my beloved" points to this speaker being a woman, in all likelihood the man's wife.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC 24 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 52-53 and Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12. A Commentary*, OTL; 2<sup>nd</sup>, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 90-93.

<sup>15</sup> Shunia Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel*, Jerusalem Biblical Studies 7 (Jerusalem: Simor, 1996). "For example, the same unit which from Jacob's point of reference is called 'his house' (his, Jacob's, *bayit*) is from Joseph's point of reference called 'his father's house' (*beit 'abiv*)" (Bendor, *The Social Structure*, 54).

In discussing the creation of a family in rural Israel, Bendor observes that the "new formation of the *beit 'ab*, consisting of wife, house, and vineyard, [represents] a decisive stage for a member of the *beit 'ab* (cf. Jos 7:24) who has come to set up his own unit of existence in his *beit 'ab*, in the inheritance of his fathers."<sup>16</sup> Bendor's observation therefore suggests the following scenario: A young woman has left her own family's house to join her new husband in his *bêt 'āb*, on the *nahālā* of his father. Part of this process of starting a new family involves planting a vineyard.<sup>17</sup> Applying Bendor's insight suggests she is the point of reference, the speaker who has observed and is now describing the scene.

### The song as a traditional woman's oral genre

The study of women's traditional oral genres has proved to be a key way of identifying women's voices in biblical texts. In studying these genres Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes reference the work of S.D. Goitein, whose biblical studies were inspired by his analysis of women's song and poetry amongst Yemenite Jewish immigrants to Israel.<sup>18</sup> Goitein observed that the poetry of these women was generally secular, and often addressed events of the day. Van Dijk-Hemmes agrees with Goitein's argument that "[at] the beginning of the vineyard song in chapter 5, 'Let me sing for my beloved a song of my lover about his vineyard,' the first person speaker is none other than the young poetess."<sup>19</sup> She concludes that Isa 5:1a is a fragment of a love song, a reference to the vintage festival at Shiloh mentioned in Judges 21:19.<sup>20</sup>

This linking of women with the arts, and particularly the arts of song and poetry, has been highlighted by many feminist scholars. Carole Fontaine notes that in the bible wise women are specifically described as serving as mourners, writing and performing their own laments (ex. Jer 9:16).<sup>21</sup> Bekkenkamp and van Dijk note that the creation and performance of poetry, music and dance are often attributed to women; they point to Ex 15:20-21; 1 Sam 18:17, 21:12, 29:5; and Judg 5 as examples of the artistic creativity of

<sup>16</sup> Bendor, *The Social Structure*, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Bendor, *The Social Structure*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts. Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, BibInt 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993); S.D. Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 1-33; trans. Michael Carasik from S.D. Goitein, *lyyunim bamiqra* (*Studies in Scripture*) (1957).

<sup>19</sup> Goitein, "Women as Creators," 19.

<sup>20</sup> Also Jer 31:3-4 and Hos 2:17. Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, "The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom," *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Athalya Brenner; FCB 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 24-47.



women. And Carol Meyers observes that women performers are described in the Bible in connection with dances, the hand drum, and singing.

Thus, while the final form of Isa 5:1-7 continues to be the subject of debate and may indeed be mixed,<sup>22</sup> the essential kernel of the passage is a song, a genre associated with women's oral performance.<sup>23</sup>

### *šîrat dôdi*

The phrase *šîrat dôdi* (v. 1a) has been translated as "my love song" (NRSV), or "a love song" (RSV). More accurate translations are "a song of my lover" (JPS) and "the song of my friend" (NJB). However these latter translations fail to convey the sense of the term *dôd* as a male beloved.<sup>24</sup> This sense is proposed by Schmidt and Fohrer who, in arguing for the translation "song of my (male) beloved" or "song of my bridegroom," argue that Isa 5:1-7 is a bride's song about her groom.<sup>25</sup> There are strong reasons for holding firm to this translation. It most accurately reflects the text. And if the poem is viewed as emerging from a woman's oral tradition in an eighth century rural context, rendering this phrase as "song of my beloved" or "song of my bridegroom" is a reasonable conclusion.<sup>26</sup>

However, another meaning of the term *dôd* highlights the ambiguity of this verse. In addition to the translations "beloved," "friend," or "bridegroom," *dôd* may refer to a divinity. Ringgren argues that Isa 5:1 is "the only passage in the OT where *dodh* is used as a divine appellative."<sup>27</sup> And Blenkinsopp notes that "[the] Israelite onomasticon also attests to *dod* as a divine epithet (*Dodai*, *Dodo*, *Dodo*, *Dodihu*, *Medad*), similar to its equivalent in West Semitic, Old Arabic, and Akkadian."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For a review of genres in Isa 5:1-7 see John T. Willis, "The Genre of Isaiah 5:1-7," *JBL* 96/3 (1977): 337-62.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Meyers, "Miriam the Musician," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, Athalya Brenner, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 207-230.

<sup>24</sup> The sense conveyed here recalls the Song of Songs, as when the woman says, "My beloved (*dôdi*) is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-ge'di" (1:14).

<sup>25</sup> Referenced in John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC 24 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 53 and Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12. A Commentary*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 177.

<sup>26</sup> In contrast, if the speaker is viewed as male, the line is considerably more difficult to disentangle, with *šîrat dôdi* becoming, as in Watts, a "song sung by the male friend of the lover, perhaps the bridegroom" (Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 53).

<sup>27</sup> H. Ringgren, "דוד," *TDOT* 3:155.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ABC 19 (New York: The Anchor Bible, 2000), 207. However, as Wildberger argues, while these inferences are



Uncertainty around the precise meaning of the word *dôd* is exacerbated by the proximity of the term *yědîd*. The word *yědîd* is closely related to *dôd* and, like *dôd*, *yědîd* may refer to a human beloved or a divinity, creating uncertainty in v. 1 as to whom the singer is singing her "song of my beloved." However, keeping in mind the social context of these verses, I would argue that the sense to be foregrounded of the term *dôd* —and of *yědîd* —in the first two verses is that of the woman's human, male husband or beloved. Nonetheless, the allusions to a divinity linger and create a sense of ambiguity.

#### Speaker II – vv. 3-6

While the identity of the speaker in vv. 3-6 is not immediately clear, three key references, point ultimately to the speaker in vv. 3-6 being a divinity: the references to *yědîd*; to one who "will command over the clouds"; and to the "Lord of hosts."

#### *yědîd* (v. 1)

In v. 1 the addressee of the song is twice referred to by the woman as *yědîd*. As discussed above, the term *yědîd* is ambiguous—it may have the sense of a human beloved and/or a divinity. While the foregrounded sense in vv. 1-2 is that of the woman's beloved or husband, this choice of word opens up other possibilities as to the identity of this second speaker. While the available material is too limited to guarantee that *yědîd* refers to a deity, there is a strong inference that the 'friend' or 'beloved' is Yahweh.

#### "I will command over the clouds" (v. 6)

A second line of evidence that the speaker in vv. 3-6 is a divinity is the speaker's claim to have power over the forces of nature:

And I will make it a desert

[...]

And I will command over the clouds from making rain rain over it.

Isa 5:6 alludes to a divinity with qualities similar to those of the Canaanite deity Baal, the divine warrior whose power of life-giving fertility is associated with the autumnal

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suggestive, "the available material is too limited" to guaranteed the validity of the conclusion that *dôd* refers to a divinity in Isa 5:1 (Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 180).

rainfall.<sup>29</sup> While the identity of the second speaker has not yet been revealed, the words spoken in the final line of the speech leave no doubt that this is a divinity who, with the power to turn the fertile land to desert, has power over life and death.

“Lord of hosts” (v. 7)

The name “Lord of hosts” is a common epithet given to Yahweh. The title originally denoted Yahweh’s role as the creator of the hosts, the celestial luminaries who sit as lesser divine beings in the heavenly council. The term appears several times in Isaiah 1-12, notably in the prophet’s inaugural vision of God seated in the temple (Isa 6; cf. 8:18, 9:6).

As we will see in the following close reading, while the identity of the speaker in vv. 3-6 is not immediately clear the evidence points to its being Yahweh. But it is an unknown woman who introduces the poem and returns to complete it in v. 7. She thus has both the first and the last word—a powerful, mournful response to the destruction of her world.

### Close Reading

The social crisis engulfing the countryside of eighth century Judah is the backdrop to the poetry of Isa 5:1-7. In responding to this context the poet employs a wide range of rhetorical techniques, with the “vineyard” (*kerem*) serving as the poem’s keyword and a powerful metaphor. Throughout this reading attention is given to the unknown woman’s point of view. As the dominant voice and an integral part of her social context, her perspective is critical to a full understanding of the poem.

Verses 1-2—spoken by a woman

1a) Let me sing, pray, for my beloved a song of my beloved about his vineyard<sup>30</sup>

A village woman introduces the Song of the Vineyard with the cry, “Let me sing.” This use of the cohortative form (coupled with the entreaty “pray”) conveys the speaker’s powerful determination and her personal interest in her words. The twofold repetition

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<sup>29</sup> See W. Herrmann, “Baal,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. Van der Horst (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 132-139. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh, like Baal, has the power to bring the rains (Lev 26:4; Isa 30:23) and to withhold them (Deut 11:17; 28:24; Amos 4:7).

<sup>30</sup> Translations are those of the author.

of the possessive suffix ("my") in this initial statement reinforces this sense of a personal stake in what is to follow.

This introductory statement ends with the word *kerem*, "vineyard." In Isa 5:1-7, the word "vineyard" is repeated six times; it is repeated as the masculine singular pronoun ("it") an additional fifteen times. The words "grapes" (vv. 2 and 4) and "stinking grapes" (vv. 2 and 4) form part of this rhetorical cluster. The persuasive power of the poetry of Isa 5:1-7 is due in large part to the strength of the vineyard metaphor and the ability of this metaphor to affect listeners in many ways and on many levels. As will be seen, in addition to referring to a physical and social entity, the vineyard draws attention to the reverence for women and land in ancient Near Eastern cultural traditions, the toxic social situation in the countryside, the world that is abandoned by Yahweh to the desert, and the elites who are judged and condemned for their crimes.

#### 1b) There was a vineyard belonging to my beloved on a fertile hillside

Underlying this verse, and the verses that follow, is an ancient Near Eastern cultural tradition wherein the realms of women's procreativity and agriculture are intertwined. A homology between women and the land in ancient Israel is strongly suggested by the terracotta 'pillar' figurines found in household sites and by the place of the asherim and Asherah in ritual practice.<sup>31</sup> The shape of these pillar-based figurines is very suggestive, as it is "as if here the image of woman was merged into the image of 'a kind of tree with breasts.'" <sup>32</sup> It is not known whether in eighth century Israel goddess worship persisted or whether the powers of female divinity had been absorbed into Yahweh. "[In] either case, like the ancient symbol of the tree of life, these tree-like female figurines were a reminder of or an icon for the divine power of life, fertility and abundance in their midst."<sup>33</sup>

In Isa 5:1b, the juxtaposition of *qeren ben-šāmen/kerem* ("vineyard"/"fertile hillside"), points to the agricultural abundance and fertile womb on which the

<sup>31</sup> These figurines were long a part of the Canaanite religious milieu. Figurines and scarabs from Middle Bronze Age Canaan depict a 'Branch Goddess'—a goddess holding branches of a tree or positioned between trees. These goddesses are "a personification of the mysterious power of fertility that was active in both animal and the plant world" Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* trans. Thomas H. Trapp; (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 131).

<sup>32</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 131).

<sup>33</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 131.

community depends for survival. That there is a parallel relationship between these first and last words is highlighted by the rhythmic and alliterative *qeren/kerem*. The importance of the “fertile hillside” is stressed by the assonance of *qeren/ben/šāmen*,<sup>34</sup> while the repetitions of *šîr*, *kerem*, and *dôdi/yědîdi* in v. 1 draw attention to this unique term *qeren ben-šāmen* (“fertile hillside”)—that stands alone at the end of the verse. The word *šāmen* conveys the rich and oily ‘fatness’ of the soil,<sup>35</sup> and also has connotations of sexuality and marriage. Perfumed oil played a part in ANE love poetry, while in the Hebrew Bible, references to scented oil are found in the Song of Songs (Song 1:3, 4:10). And the term *ben*, “son,” evokes children and family. These word choices thus begin to orient the song towards the fertility of the land and women in the context of an agricultural community.

Taken as a whole, v. 1 has several suggestive repetitions. The root for “sing” and “song” (*šîr*) is repeated twice in v. 1a. This repetition emphasizes the genre of the poem, a genre associated with women’s oral performance. The keyword, “vineyard” (*kerem*), is also repeated twice. Its placement at the beginning of v. 1b gives the word additional emphasis. And the phrase “my beloved” or “my husband” (*dôdi/yědîdi*) is repeated three times. The repetition of this emotionally-charged phrase reveals her passionate engagement with the song she is singing to her beloved. In addition, as discussed the meanings of *yědîd* and *dôd* are ambiguous. While the sense that is foregrounded in this verse is of the singer’s husband, a male beloved, there is a lingering uncertainty. The sense of *yědîd* and *dôd* as a divinity suggests that the poet is teasing out the idea that the woman is the beloved of Yahweh as well as the beloved of her husband and that the vineyard belongs to Yahweh as well as to the *nahălâ* of her husband’s family.

v. 2a) And he hoed it and he cleared it [of stones] and he planted it with grapes

In v. 2a the village woman describes her husband’s physical activity as he prepared their land for a vineyard. The rhetorical technique of accumulation or ‘piling’ a series of verbs (“hoed,” “cleared,” “planted”) conveys a sense of the hard physical labor required for

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<sup>34</sup> *ʾpē*, which normally means a “horn,” here seems to refer to a mountain ‘spur’ extending out from a range (Wildberger, 180; Watts, 55).

<sup>35</sup> *šāmen* as a reference to moist and fertile soil is attested in Num 13:20; Isa 28:1; Ezek 34:14; Neh 9:25; 1 Chr 4:40. It may be that this “fat” hill refers to “a slope endowed with a sufficient mantle of soil to forestall the colossal task of trucking basket after basket of terra rossa up slope to fill a terraced plot” (Hopkins, “Field Work,” 164).

this enterprise. While the term fertile hillside (*qeren ben-šāmen*) concluded v. 1, our focus is now drawn to the potential fruit of that soil, the dark red grape (*šôrēk*).

v. 2b) And he built a tower in its centre and even hewed a wine vat in it

The singer's description of her husband's labour-intensive activity continues. After preparing and planting the land, he built structures to protect and manage the vineyard and its fruit. Her husband chose to build a tower rather than a temporary shelter made of palm branches, indicating his understanding of the vineyard as a long-term commitment and important facet of his family's farming program. That he "even" built a wine vat in which to store the fruit of the vine reinforces this sense of stability.

v. 2c) And he waited for it to produce grapes

And it produced rotten grapes

The root *qwh* has the sense of to 'wait'; it can also mean to 'hope.' Use of this word implies that time has passed since her husband began to prepare the land and build the structures to support the vineyard. It may be that it is four years since she saw him first hoe the fertile hillside. During this time he (and she) waited and tended patiently, hoping and expecting the vine to "produce" fruit (*šh*). The final words of vv. 1b and 2a have carried us along—this is a fertile hillside, the grapes he has planted are the best, deep red grapes. As the family waited for the vineyard to bear fruit they would have developed and maintained other parts of their land, in cooperation with members of the household. As her foremothers had done for generations, the woman would have worked on the *naḥālâ*; she would likely also have borne children.

But now, in spite of all their labour, they are rewarded with ... *bě'ušim* —"rotten grapes." While this unique word is difficult to define with precision, the sense is of "sour," "stinking," "rotten" grapes.<sup>36</sup> Following upon the singer's description of the fertile hillside and the patient activity of the farmer to develop his vineyard, this image of the fruit of his labour is visceral and jarring.<sup>37</sup> Something is wrong; something is

<sup>36</sup> Suggestions are "thistles," "fruit of wild vines," "unripe fruit," "grapes with a tart, sour taste," "spoiled by antracnosa," and "rottenness, putridity" (Wildberger, 182).

<sup>37</sup> The emphasis on the word *bě'ušim*, and its contrast with the hoped-for deep red grapes, is reinforced by end-rhyme, *'nābīm- bē'ušim*. End-rhyme, typically achieved by the use of the same suffix or ending in successive cola, is the most common form of rhyme in Hebrew poetry (Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to its Techniques* JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 229-234.

rotten. The world of the singer and her husband has lost its orientation and gone off course. Instead of the taste of sweet red grapes there is the taste of bitterness; instead of the fragrant aroma of the vineyard there is only a terrible stink.

In a community in which the realms of agriculture and women's procreativity are intertwined and revered, stinking, rotten grapes are a potent metaphor for a toxic situation. The fertile land that had supported and sustained the woman's family for generations was now supporting the king and his retainers; the singer may have begun to worry that they could even lose their *nahālā* to the king. The meticulous planning that went into ensuring the well-being of her family and the land was being undermined as economic decisions shifted to the marketplace. She likely felt her own power and status within the community eroding as more prestige and control began to go to the men who dominated the economic life.<sup>38</sup> As well, she may have noticed that because of the changes they had been forced to make to their farming practices in order to make space for new vineyards the earth was no longer as fertile as it once was. The sweet possibilities of the fertile hillside had, as a result of the king's demands, produced their bitter opposite—rotten grapes. Thus the procreative power of land and women was disoriented and her community was bearing bitter fruit. As is implied by the woman's statement, and will be confirmed by the second speaker, this loss of what was revered in her society is manifested as a devastated world.

Verses 3-6—spoken by “my beloved”/Yahweh

Our initial assumption is that the character who responds to the woman's words is her husband. However the initial ambiguity around the terms *yēdîd* and *dôd* flavours our reading, and disturbing evidence continues to accumulate regarding the speaker's true identity.

v. 3     And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah  
Judge, pray, between me and my vineyard

The emphatic “And now” marks an abrupt turning point in the poem, with a new speaker addressing his words to the “inhabitants of Jerusalem” and “men of Judah.” As Marvin Chaney observes, while these parallel terms have traditionally been taken to

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<sup>38</sup> Carol Meyers *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press), 193.

refer collectively to the populations of Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel, when Isa 5:1-7 is read in the context of agricultural intensification this conclusion is unlikely.<sup>39</sup> It is not the victims of agricultural intensification who are being condemned but its perpetrators: the dynastic houses and royal elites.

The listeners are being called to make a judgment. This particular construction (*šāpat bēn ... ūbēn*) generally relates "to the restoration of *šālôm* which prevailed prior to the prevailing strife or dispute."<sup>40</sup> Because many disputes concerned the welfare of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger,<sup>41</sup> this call for judgment connotes a return to fairness and equitability in social, economic, and political relationships.

v. 4    What more was there to do for my vineyard that I did not do for it?

When I waited for it to produce grapes

And it produced rotten grapes?

Verse 4 is dominated by two powerful and dramatic rhetorical questions. In vv. 1-2 the woman had reported that all necessary steps were taken to prepare and care for the vineyard; the repetition of the verb root *šh* ("do," "produce") four times in v. 4 reinforces this sense of hard physical work. The inevitable answer to the question in v. 4a is that no more could have been done for the vineyard. Verse 4b then repeats, almost verbatim, the words spoken by the woman in v. 2. The term *madû'a* ("When") turns her statement into a dramatic question designed to force the audience of Judean elites to accuse themselves. By repeating her words the vineyard owner not only condemns the perpetrators, he also conveys his emphatic support for her position.

v. 5a) And now, let me tell you what I am about to do to my vineyard

In v. 5a the speaker introduces his own judgment upon his vineyard. The repetition from v. 3a of "And now" helps create a mood of anticipation. This sense of dramatic unease is heightened by the use of the participle form of "to do" (*šh*) with the emphatic "I" (*ʾănē*), instead of the usual imperfect form. The participle conveys the sense of something 'about to happen'—here, it is like something about to go over a precipice.

<sup>39</sup> Chaney, "Sour Grapes," 106.

<sup>40</sup> Mafico, 3:1105.

<sup>41</sup> For example, see Ps 82; Jer 5:28-29; 22:15; Deut 1:16-17.



The remainder of vv. 5 and 6 relates the destruction of the vineyard, as the steps taken by the farmer to construct the vineyard are set in reverse. The piling on of a series of active and passive verbs creates an associational cluster and stresses the finality and ferocity of the vineyard's undoing.

v. 5b) I will clear away its hedge and it will be destroyed  
I will break down its stone wall and it will be trampled

v. 6a) And I will make it a desert

In v. 2 we heard the woman describe how her husband cleared the land of stones, stones which may have gone into the building of the wall. Now, that wall is destroyed. Deliberately clearing away the hedge and breaking down the stone wall removes the barriers that protected the vineyard. By withdrawing this protection the owner will leave the vineyard to the mercy of the forces of the desert.<sup>42</sup>

v. 6a) It will not be pruned and it will not be hoed

The constructive work of the farmer who in v. 2a hoed, cleared and planted the land continues to be systematically undone. Pruning and hoeing are required for the care of the vineyard; to give up on these means that the owner has decided to give up completely on the vineyard.

And thorns and thistles will grow up

If a vineyard is not hoed, "thorns and thistles" grow up in it. The exact meaning of *šāmīr wāšāyīt*, which appears only in the book of Isaiah, is impossible to determine.<sup>43</sup> The word pair is likely chosen for its assonance.<sup>44</sup> Zohary argues that the term does not refer to a specific genre of plant—it should be taken to imply a plant that is "very sharp."<sup>45</sup> Here, the use of the term indicates that the land will be left uncultivated and untended; the careful work of caring for the vineyard will unravel.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> This is a reversal of Yahweh's pledge in the Song of Moses: "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye" (Deut 32:10).

<sup>43</sup> See Isa 5:6; 7:23-25 [3x]; 9:17; 10:17; and 27:4. Suggestions for *šāmīr wāšāyīt* include wild carrot, Christ's thorn, lotus thorn, and yarrow.

<sup>44</sup> This word pair is typically translated "briers and thorns"; I have translated it as "thorns and thistles" in order to capture its assonance.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible. A complete handbook to all the plants with 200 full-color plates taken in the natural habitat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 153.

<sup>46</sup> Thorns and thistles, as expressive of the final condition of the vineyard, is a recurring motif in chs 6-12 and also reflects a concern for the outcome of an Assyrian invasion.

v. 6b) And I will command over the clouds from making rain rain over it

Only in this final, vivid statement do we know with certainty this speaker's identity. Until now the possibility lingered that this was the woman's husband, who has given up on or been forced to abandon his vineyard. But this is not (or not only) the woman's human beloved, but a divinity. What is now apparently Yahweh's judgment upon the elites of Jerusalem and Judah for their crimes against the villagers concludes with the statement that as the final act in his withdrawal he will withhold the rains—an action that will lay the land bare to drought, sterility, and death. With Yahweh's final command the "fertile hill" of v. 1 will be overwhelmed by a waterless desert, a parched wasteland where nourishing plants cannot grow.

Verse 7—spoken by a woman

In v. 7 the village woman returns to conclude the poem. Using powerful rhetoric, she boldly speaks for Yahweh and for the *nahālā*. The final shift from *dôd/ yědîd* as husband to *dôd/yědîd* as Yahweh corroborates two claims: that the vineyard/*nahālā* belongs to both her family and Yahweh and that both her husband and Yahweh are her beloved. With the revelation that the second speaker is Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, this woman speaker is revealed as an integral part, and spokesperson for, her family, the land, and her God.

v. 7a) For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel

In vv. 1-2 the woman described how her husband laboured to plant a vineyard, looking ahead and working hard to build structures to protect and store the deep, red fruit of the vine. In a society in which the realms of agriculture and women's procreativity are revered, her description of a vineyard on a fertile hillside speaks to a community full of potential and promise. But in spite of her husband's efforts their vineyard produced only rotten, stinking grapes. The term *bě'ušim* became a potent metaphor for a toxic situation, one in which her family and their land are being ruined because of the monarchy's unjust demands.

Now she returns to dramatically conclude her statement. With her words any lingering doubt as to the identity of the second speaker is gone—this is Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, a divinity with power over life and death, fertility and sterility. And the vineyard that he has been judging is the "house of Israel"—the dynastic house that is the perpetrator of

the injustice experienced by her family. This identification of Yahweh as their judge would no doubt have struck fear in the hearts of these ruling elites. And the term “house of Israel,” which draws attention to and reminds listeners of the northern kingdom, seems designed to increase their panic. While her words were likely spoken prior to the destruction of Israel in 722 B.C.E., they may have come at a time when Assyria was making ominous rumblings in Israel’s direction. This allusion to the Assyrian terror to the north, and the potential threat to the south, would most certainly have intensified the fear in the hearts of Judean listeners.

v. 7b) And the men of Judah his delightful planting

The root for “delightful,” (שׂעשׂע), has the sense of ‘fondle’ or ‘caress’ and so recalls the woman’s love song and the vines planted by her beloved. In contrast, she says, Yahweh’s “delightful planting” is the “men of Judah”—the Judean elites. As these are the men whose actions have led to her family’s ruination, the word “delightful” is bitterly sarcastic.

v. 7c) And he waited for justice but, no! bloodshed

For righteousness but, no! a cry

With this reframing of the refrains, the waiting and hoping that she first articulated in v. 2, and was restated by Yahweh in v. 4, reaches a crescendo. There is a shift in point of view from Yahweh back to the village woman as she in effect takes back centre stage. Calling upon her listeners to wake up, she demands that they hear her perspective.

This woman, the *nahālā*, and Yahweh expected the rulers and elites to produce “grapes”—they expected them to practice justice and righteousness. Taken as a pair, the terms ‘justice and righteousness’ concern Yahweh’s expectation that Israel “be a community that practices generative, positive social relationships without abuse or exploitation.”<sup>47</sup> In the prophetic books in particular, Yahweh does not expect piety but just social dealings in which the rights of all, and particularly the marginalized, are respected.<sup>48</sup> When justice and righteousness are practiced and the people experience

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<sup>47</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 48.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8; Isa 1:17, 21-23; 11:45.

equitable social relationships, the people enjoy *šālôm*—well-being in a fertile, peaceful land.

But, says the woman, instead of producing justice and righteousness, the elites' actions have produced the opposite—the rotten fruit of injustice and unrighteousness. Two powerful and visceral wordplays, designed to denote a reversal or inversion, cut through to the heart of the monarchy's crimes. Rather than producing "justice" (*mišpāt*), which is the right, equitable, order of the world, the elites have produced "bloodshed" (*mišpāh*). Instead of celebrating an abundance of deep red grapes the villagers are drowning in deep red blood. This "bloodshed" is the opposite of justice; it is "the outpouring of lifeblood through exploitative social practice; that is, the kinds of economic transactions that abuse, injure, and slowly bleed the poor to death."<sup>49</sup> It is no coincidence that the assonance of *mišpāt/mišpāh* ("justice"/"bloodshed") enfolds *mišhpāhā* ("village") within a word cluster. As she and other villagers had learned over the centuries, when they live in right relationship to each other and the land all is well and they and the land are blessed. But the elites' insatiable thirst for wine has disoriented the community. The interconnected lives of the families who earned their livings in the village vineyards and surrounding lands have been laid waste by injustice.

The sense that the world is turned upside down is heightened by the second word play. Instead of right social relationships (*š ʿdāqāh*) the actions of the elites have produced a cry (*š ʿāqāh*). This cry is the cry for help to Yahweh, made throughout Israel's history, by those who have experienced injustice. This cry is, as Brueggemann puts it, "the most visceral announcement that things are not right."<sup>50</sup> As Yahweh had waited and hoped for justice and righteousness, the woman and her family too had waited and hoped. But instead of the fulfillment of their lives on a fertile hillside they are left with a wasted land. The villagers' lands, like their hopes, are drying up and becoming a wasted barren desert. And her "song of my beloved" has become the sound of a cry, a song of mournful lament. The chiasmus created by (song/fertile hillside—barren desert/cry) *šīr/qeren ben-šāmen/kerem – bātā/š ʿāqāh* powerfully and

<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 11. It is the cry of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt (Ex 3:7-9), the cry of the Israelites oppressed by the Philistines (1 Sam 9:16), and the cry of the poor, afflicted by the mighty (Job 34:28).

conclusively drives home the sense of a world turned upside down by selfishness and greed.

### **The Green Revolution**

In the last decades of the twentieth century a situation analogous to that described in Isa 5:1-7 developed in India. As in Judah, agriculture had developed in Indian communities over many centuries, with the villagers responding to the unique environmental requirements of their land. Common to the agricultural systems that developed in these two societies were diverse cropping, a dependence on organic inputs, and a labour pool drawn from within the community. Women and men performed specific roles in accordance with their communities' requirements. But in 1960s India, as in eighth century Judah, the demands of the Indian central state compelled farmers to make drastic changes to their systems of agriculture—and the Green Revolution was born.<sup>51</sup> Like the unnamed woman of Isa 5:1-7, in India Vandana Shiva has been a vocal and persistent critic of the Green Revolution—demanding that people be made aware of and react to the damage being done to traditional society, women, and the land.

The first years of the Green Revolution in India were marked by great enthusiasm as tremendous gains in wheat and rice production were realized. By the early 1970s, however, the initial euphoria began to be tempered as the negative social and ecological consequences of the Green Revolution became clear. Whereas in traditional agriculture inputs were generated by villagers on the farm, in order to participate in the Green Revolution farmers had to purchase expensive inputs (HYV seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, as well as mechanical irrigation systems) from outside suppliers, typically on credit. As the HYV seeds did not reproduce themselves these had to be purchased anew every year. And it soon became apparent that high yields occurred only under optimal conditions and that Green Revolution agriculture would not be uniformly successful in every region. For farmers in poorly-producing regions

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<sup>51</sup> For general information on the Green Revolution see Richard L. Lobb, "Green Revolution," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, Solomon H. Katz (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 2003), 155-157. See Bernhard Glaeser, ed., *The Green Revolution revisited. Critique and alternatives* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) for a series of critical articles relating to Green Revolution implementation, policy, and alternative approaches around the world; also see B.S. Hansra and A.N. Shukla, eds., *Social, Economic and Political Implications of Green Revolution in India* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1991) for a series of articles looking at the Green Revolution in India from macro- and micro-levels.

failure of their now single crop could mean a disastrous financial debt. As poor farmers lost their lands to increasingly wealthy landowners the landless rural population increased. Income distribution shifted dramatically in favour of farmers with high and middle incomes and absentee landlords. These shifts in income contributed to the breakdown of traditional structures of support. For example, extended families increasingly found that they could no longer provide their function of providing social security and care for older family members. And unemployment and social breakdown in the countryside led to mass migration of the rural poor to cities and the development of impoverished urban slums.

For rural Indian women the Green Revolution had a significant, and mostly unfavourable, impact. In poor, small-cultivator households in particular, the increased need for cash incomes to cover the costs of inputs forced women to seek work as agricultural labourers. Those women who were able to obtain work were paid lower wages than men and were often assigned the more labour-intensive tasks such as weeding, transplanting, and harvesting. In poor households that were trying to avoid hiring paid labourers the increased need for unpaid female labour in farming tasks added to women's already high labour burden. And women's earning opportunities were further displaced through mechanization of post-harvest activities, a traditional area of wage employment for women.

In addition to these social problems, the Green Revolution had many serious ecological consequences. Monoculture cropping meant that the single crop on which the farmer was dependent could be attacked and wiped out by a pest that was difficult to control with pesticides. At the same time, farmers discovered that pests that were obscure or relatively harmless prior to the introduction of HYVs now proliferated. The increased pesticide use required to deal with these pests was linked to illness and death in humans, animals and other insects. It was found that in addition to requiring massive quantities of pesticides, HYV seeds also required large (and steadily increasing) amounts of chemical fertilizers. This intensive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers caused the gradual elimination of organic matter from the soil and the loss of soil fertility. Pesticide and fertilizer runoff into waterways was also linked to the contamination of water and the death of fish. While HYV seeds required massive amounts of water, soil erosion caused by monocropping drastically reduced the land's

water-holding capacity. Consequently, heavy investments in mechanized, fossil-fuel dependent, irrigation systems were required. Waterlogging and salinated soils occurred in these canal-irrigated tracts, while areas dependent on well irrigation experienced drought and desertification. Furthermore, reliance on a limited variety of crops also meant a loss of biodiversity. Many plants whose seeds bore valuable genetic traits were lost.

In my analysis of Isa 5:1-7 I proposed that it is a woman speaker who relates and criticizes the social and ecological upheavals engulfing her community. In the context of the Green Revolution, as in other similar situations around the world, we also hear the voices of powerful women. In India, Vandana Shiva takes the position that the Green Revolution had devastating consequences for traditional Indian society and the natural environment. Shiva observes that for more than four thousand years agriculture in India had been carried out in a sustainable manner within a traditional, subsistence economy.<sup>52</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, "forty centuries of agriculture began to be eroded and erased as the green revolution, designed by multinational corporations and western male experts, homogenized nature's diversity and the diversity of human knowledge on a reductionist pattern of agriculture, evolved by global research centres."<sup>53</sup> With the introduction of Green Revolution technology, Indian agriculture "became an activity aimed primarily at the production of agricultural commodities for profit."<sup>54</sup>

Central to Shiva's critique is her contention that the Green Revolution restructured the way power was distributed in Indian society, to the detriment of rural communities. As farmers were integrated into global markets of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides their links to their soils and communities were disrupted. The shift from community control over livelihoods to dependence on the central state for agricultural policy and inputs led to social disintegration and vulnerability. For the community as a whole this meant the breakdown of traditional social supports and, for poor farmers in

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<sup>52</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), 96-120; idem, *The Violence of the Green Revolution. Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd.; Penang, Malaysia: Third World Network, 1991), 61-102.

<sup>53</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 98-99.

<sup>54</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 103.



particular, desperate economic straits.<sup>55</sup> Shiva argues that the Green Revolution "meant the ... transformation of organic communities into groups of uprooted and alienated individuals searching for abstract identities."<sup>56</sup>

In Shiva's view the success of Indian subsistence farming was due to stable, rooted communities that had learned to work within nature's processes. In these traditional Indian communities social relationships were based on mutual (though assymmetrical) obligations.<sup>57</sup> Fundamental to these healthy social relationships was the interdependence and complementarity of the separate male and female domains of work, with women playing a significant part in agriculture and soil maintenance. For women, the shift from traditional subsistence agriculture to industrial, market-based agriculture meant a loss of control over soil management and food production; "with the market as the measure of all productivity, the 'value' of women's work and status falls, while their work in producing food for survival increases."<sup>58</sup> Shiva charges that since the Green Revolution, Indian women have, in addition to increased levels of poverty, experienced increased levels of discrimination and dowry death; the number of abortions of female fetuses has also increased, reflecting the increased devaluation of women.<sup>59</sup>

The ecological devastation that accompanied the new agricultural technology is viewed by Shiva as a direct consequence of the move to state from community control over agricultural production. As the "shift to external dependence politically led to societal vulnerability," so too the "shift from diversity to monocultures, and the shift from internal inputs to external inputs of seeds and chemicals led to ecological vulnerability of agricultural ecosystems."<sup>60</sup> The fragmentation of society caused by the Green Revolution is mirrored in the fragmentation of the land.<sup>61</sup> Desertification, water-logging and salinity, nutrient deficiency, toxicity, and the depletion of organic matter in

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<sup>55</sup> Shiva contends that between 2003 and 2005 nearly 2000 Indian farmers committed suicide due to poverty and indebtedness (Vandana Shiva, *India Divided. Diversity and Democracy Under Attack* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 87).

<sup>56</sup> Vandana Shiva, "Homeless in the 'Global Village,'" *Ecofeminism*, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva; Halifax: Fernwood Publications (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993), 99.

<sup>57</sup> Shiva, *Violence*, 171-2.

<sup>58</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 116-120.

<sup>60</sup> Shiva, *Violence*, 175.

<sup>61</sup> Shiva, *Violence*, 24.

the soil are the direct and inevitable consequences of a philosophy of agriculture motivated by profit and manipulated by national and international elites.

## **Conclusion**

While great wisdom may be gleaned from the Isaiah passage when it is read independently, the social and ecological relevance of the passage is enriched when it is read in light of the Green Revolution and the work of Vandana Shiva. A dialogue is created between an ancient voice and a modern one, deepening our understanding of both. Because the Indian example highlights the damage that new farming practices have done to the environment, reading Isa 5:1-7 in relation to this analogous context emphasizes this aspect of the biblical passage. The land is inseparable from the community, and decisions that take control from the community and disrupt the balance between the community and the land perhaps inevitably harm the earth. The cry for justice and righteousness can be interpreted as a call for justice and righteousness in relation to the land. This reading can further serve as a reminder that the Indian and Judean situations are not unique; readers may consider other examples of ecological degradation in situations with similar social dynamics. For example, readers are reminded that farmers around the world are currently being forced by multinational corporations to grow corn for biofuels on land which previously grew a variety of crops—farmers have predictably gone hungry because of lack of food options and the land has suffered under monocropping. Furthermore, reading Isaiah in light of the Indian situation may inspire readers to consider the cumulative effect of these changes to farming practices and to take action with regards to the significant harm these changes are doing to the world environment. To use the rhetoric of Isaiah, today, as in eighth century Judah, Yahweh is withdrawing his embrace, leaving the land vulnerable to the forces of the desert. Much now depends on the insights and words of prophets like Isaiah to penetrate this dark reality and perhaps to turn it around.

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